

Love with a Tech Weenie

Alumna finds her engineer husband to be more creative than she originally thought.

by **Judy Belk**



Illustration by Janell Genovese/Lilla Rogers Studio

It was his old college slide rule that triggered the flood of memories. We stumbled across it while rummaging through the dusty storage room. One of the kids asked, "What's that?"

"It's what Dad used for a calculator in college," I said, suddenly feeling as ancient as though I were describing a horse-and-buggy.

On campus a slide rule strapped to the belt was a dead giveaway that the owner was a Tech Weenie — an affectionate nickname given to engineering students. And Dad back then was "Peeko" — Roger Peeks (McC74) — one of a handful of black Tech Weenies.

When I arrived on Northwestern's campus in 1971, Peeko had already earned the reputation as one of the smartest guys in the engineering school. Yet his name, Peeko, sounded hip and warm. Not what I imagined for a Tech Weenie type.

During my first year, Peeko and I hung out with the same group of black students. Shy and reserved, he most often played the role of an appreciative audience, letting others take center stage. His social generosity gave him the license and respect to move with ease among a variety of groups on campus. I asked a friend why she thought Peeko seemed so quiet. Her response: "When you're that smart, you don't have to say anything."

It was some time during my sophomore year that Peeko came more in focus for me. At first it was the sheer challenge of cracking that shy veneer, and then it was just plain curiosity. Somewhere between the challenge and the curiosity I fell in love.

One thing I discovered about Peeko was that he had several nicknames. I came across one of them when calling his home for the first time during a quarter break. I wanted to make a good impression, so when his younger brother answered the phone, I



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purred in my most proper voice, "Could I please speak to Roger?"

I heard his brother yelling in the background, "Hey, Peewee, some white woman wants you on the phone." My heart stopped. At that moment being mistaken for a white woman was the least of my worries. I had just fallen in love with a guy named Peewee.

Well, we survived the name crisis, but I still had doubts. Could an artsy left-brain speech major find love and happiness with a right-brain biomedical Tech Weenie? I thought I would put true love to the test:

"You know, if we're going to be together, it's important for me to know you're in touch with your innermost self."

"And how would you know that?"

"Well, you could consider taking a film criticism course with me."
(Why I equated a film criticism course with self-actualization, I'll never know.)

So we enrolled in An Analysis of the Film Noir Genre. We spent the cold winter quarter snuggled up watching some of the great classics: *Laura*, *Double Indemnity*, *D.O.A.*, *The Killers* (both versions).

Peeko couldn't believe our only requirements were to view great movies and write one final paper. As a radio/television/film major, I felt compelled to explain that viewing the films was the easy part. Articulating the meaning of them all could be very challenging — especially for a Tech Weenie.

For our final papers, I analyzed *Laura* while Peeko decided to write a comparative analysis of the two versions of *The Killers*. I thought he might be out of his league, but he didn't flinch and declined my offer of assistance. Confidence. I liked that.

Still, before Peeko picked up our graded papers, I tried preparing him by noting that the most important thing was his willingness to sample a piece of my world. I was relieved when he returned, handed me my paper and I saw a large B marked in red. But then a wave of panic set in. If I only got a B, I cringed at the thought of Peeko's grade. Then he started reading from his paper. "A sound insightful analysis. Crisp, sharp, excellent," the professor scrawled.

"Let me see that." I grabbed the paper in disbelief. A huge red A stared back at me.

We both burst out laughing.

Now, nearly 30 years later, we're still together. At the end of an occasional film noir viewing, Peeko can't resist leaning over and whispering, "Hey, you want me to explain the inner meaning of what you just saw?"

I usually just roll my eyes and say, "I think I get the drift, Peewee."

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